

What Should I Do?

by Lisa Hoffman

"I think Marvin is having a heart attack!"

Marvin is a 79-year-old close friend with heart disease, and we are studying to ordain as Zen priests. Another priest candidate named Kirk told me this at a three day priest training in North Fork, California, near Yosemite.

It was 6:00 a.m. and the nearest hospital was 45 minutes away in Fresno. An ambulance was called while I ran to get Andrea, who is a doctor. Kirk is a physician's assistant, and one of our teachers, Alan, had nitroglycerin. Marvin was in good hands, given the situation. As we waited for the ambulance, it was a given that Sarita, another good friend, would go with Marvin to the hospital. It seemed natural that I would go to support them.

But I was torn. These trainings were the first of their kind -- teaching Americans how to be Zen priests in 21st-century America. They didn't happen very often, and the long trip to North Fork was hard for me because of a chronic pain condition. Besides, I found myself thinking that morning, Sarita didn't really need me. She could handle things herself. I was very concerned about Marvin, *and* irritated at the position I found myself in.

What was the Right Action?

Right Action is part of the Eightfold Noble Path, the Buddha's first teachings after his enlightenment. Other points include Right Speech and Right Livelihood. The heart of this Path is the heart of Buddhism: not causing harm to yourself or anyone else. Right Action means we are in harmony with the "10,000 things" -- everyone and everything in the world.

The classic definition of Right Action is not killing, not taking what is not given, and not misusing sexuality. This description evokes powerful images: murder, stealing, assault. Yet there are also every day manifestations we have all experienced.

Not killing can mean not killing someone's spirit, including your own. It's easy to do this with words or how someone is treated.

Not taking what is not given can mean taking someone's energy or time when it has not been offered or requested. It can mean giving your own energy or time when you are depleted.

Not misusing sexuality can mean not flirting with someone who is interested in you when you are not interested in them. It can mean having a conversation when you have issues with your partner rather than having sex to cover them up.

Each of these everyday acts causes harm to both parties, and often to others. When someone's spirit is harmed, friends, family, and even coworkers, can be affected.

How is it that we humans, who usually want to do good, can cause so much hurt? The Buddha talked about common hindrances to living harmoniously: greed, hate and delusion. These are also strong words that summon graphic images. It's easy to see how greed, hate, delusion, or all three could lead to killing, stealing or sexual violence. What about more mundane situations?

I found each of these hindrances in my reactions to Marvin's early-morning heart incident. Greed drove my desire to complete the weekend training. Aversion arose in the form of frustration and resentment toward this unwanted situation. And delusion led me to think that Sarita could handle the hospital alone.

How can we do the right thing when overwhelmed with such thoughts and feelings? Or when we are not being supported to take Right Action? I know several people who have gotten into car accidents after being exhorted to continue drinking at parties when they were trying to stop for the night.

What cut through my swirl of desires that morning was mindfulness. I noticed my conflicted feelings, thoughts, and their basis. Yes, there was greed, hate and delusion in my response, *and* it was understandable that I wanted to finish the training. But a 79-year-old man was possibly having a heart attack in a remote rural area. Those of us closest to him, and familiar with his health situation, needed to support him at a strange hospital.

Awareness in the moment can make the difference between acting out when a driver cuts me off, or when a friend says something hurtful. When my impulse is to strike back, mindfulness offers choices.

Bhikku Bohdi, in *The Noble Eightfold Path*, writes: "Whenever these mental states arise in the mind, one should observe them objectively until they have disappeared or insight develops (seeing them as impermanent, productive of suffering, or insubstantial)." Flipping off a thoughtless driver, or meeting pain with more pain doesn't help anyone, including myself. In fact, I am creating karma that can affect a wide circle of people.

Zen sees karma as cause and effect. Some karma is deeply ingrained and many years, decades, or even centuries old. The way your parents were treated by their parents shapes how you are treated and view the world. The result can be karma that is positive or negative, depending on the treatment. It's easy to see how karma plays out in alcoholic families, or families caught in a pattern of physical abuse.

On a more mundane level, I am continuing that driver's karma when I flip him off. Who knows what harm my bad humor might cause to the next person I encounter? Mindfulness doesn't mean I become a saint. It simply means I might actually notice how I'm being affected by a person or situation and let negative or destructive feelings and thoughts arise and pass before acting. Which is what I did the morning of Marvin's attack.

I went with Marvin and Sarita to the hospital. Alan's nitroglycerin and quick action from Andrea and Kirk prevented a heart attack. I was disappointed to miss a third of the training, and very clear that I was in the right place doing the right thing.

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